



# Monsieur Lazhar

**Director:** Philippe Falardeau  
**Country:** Canada  
**Date:** 2011

**A review by Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun Times*:**

In an opening scene of "Monsieur Lazhar," it's Simon's day to pick up cartons of milk and deliver them to his Montreal fourth-grade classroom before the school day begins. Looking in through the door, he realizes that his teacher has hung herself from a ceiling pipe. Only one other student sees this before the teachers usher all the students back into the playground.

This incident, reported in a Quebec newspaper, is the inspiration for Bachir Lazhar (Fellag) to present himself at the school principal's office and volunteer to teach the class. He is a legal immigrant from Algeria, he explains, where he taught primary school for 19 years. The principal is Mme. Vaillancourt (Danielle Proulx), who like most school administrators these days, is rigid in conforming to the rules. Hiring Monsieur Lazhar is a bit of an excursion for her, but he is a well-spoken, presentable man and makes a good impression.

"Monsieur Lazhar," which begins in the dead of winter, follows his work in the classroom all the way through until summer. During that time, he — and we — get to know the students, who are generally cheerful and well-behaved, and get on well with their new teacher. They are assumed to be traumatized by their teacher's suicide, and a psychologist is assigned to spend closed-door sessions with the class. We, and Monsieur Lazhar, are closed out of these sessions, but Lazhar on his own tells the students some gentle truths and assures them it wasn't their fault.

For this and other transgressions, he is criticized by the principal; to follow the rules, a teacher seems hardly allowed to be human. A student throws a paper ball at a classmate, and Lazhar, standing right there, taps him sharply on the head. This, too, is wrong; teachers are forbidden to touch students in any way. God forbid they would hug one, or pat one on the shoulder. I now realize that when Sister Ambrosina in the first grade at St. Mary's in Champaign snapped us with a strict fingernail it was brutality, although I always knew why I had it coming.

Lazhar has some challenges. French is spoken differently in Algeria and Quebec — and in France too, perhaps. He dictates some Balzac for the students to write down and is informed by them it is "prehistoric." He finds a sympathetic fellow teacher to confide in, and perhaps she also rather likes him.

There is a great deal more to be known about Monsieur Lazhar's personal life, which I won't reveal. It adds an additional dimension to the trauma of the students. Simon in particular blames himself for the suicide; the dead teacher must have known he would bring the milk to class that day, he reasons, and must have known he would find her hanging body. Why else would a teacher choose to hang herself in her schoolroom?

It's a question without an answer. One of the qualities of "Monsieur Lazhar," which was one of this year's Academy Award nominees in the foreign-language film category, is that it has no simple questions and simple answers. Its purpose is to present us with a situation, explore the people involved and show us a man who is dealing with his own deep hurts

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**Extracts from an interview with the director, Philippe Falardeau, by Nell Minow of BeliefNet:**

*How do you work with children on such a sensitive and difficult subject?*

So, working with the children—it's interesting, because, we see the film and we see the stuff happening through the children's characters. But you have to remember that when you're crafting the film, these things happen over a period of three to four months so they see the stuff coming. There's an audition, and then you talk about the subject with the parents and with the children, and so it's slow in happening. It's never a traumatic experience for the young actors, because it's an abstract idea on paper, first, and when we're on the set, we're at three months later and we've talked about it a lot. And I found out that at that age, ten eleven, twelve, they're often dismissed as too young to talk about it, but that is not true. Even though none of these events happened to me when I was a young kid—I hated it when adults were saying, "It's not a subject for you. We can't talk about it. You're too young for that. You're too young for that." Especially when I had a question about something. So, I wanted a film that would say, "No, they're not too young for that, actually," and Bachir Lazhar is not treating them like that—he's treating them like equals.

*Even when he makes a mistake in thinking they're capable of more than they are.*

Exactly, and I think life finds a way—or the children will find a way—of saying, well, this is just a little over our heads. Because there is the issue of competence: are they able to do a dictation taken from Balzac? And there's the issue of life and the questions that are raised by some events; you cannot hide them from children, even if they're ten years old. So for me, it's just a long process of audition, taking your time, not just throwing them in front of a camera and saying, "OK, read your lines," and then, "Bye." It's meeting the person, giving them 15, 20 minutes—and if I like them, I invite them back for another audition that's more complex, and then I work with a coach—she's an actress also—but she's good with kids, so, she rehearsed with me and she knows where I want to go in terms of tone, so when I'm off on other tasks, she keeps working with the children. We never leave the children alone. And the third part which is probably the most important, I tried to make the set a summer camp. They know it's work—but if they have fun, I believe that they trust you, and if they trust you they can reach into their own emotions to give you some personal stuff, like the cathartic scene with the boy. I wish I could say I have a director's trick I can use on children. I don't. It's just life happening there, because I think the children feel comfortable. With the young girl, it's a little bit different because she's a very good actress, and she could snap out of the emotion and just look at me and say, "Do you want another one? Do you want another take?" and she could get back into it. The boy was a slow process and difficult process. But in any case, I think trust is the key to work.

*Most directors say that they were inspired to make films by the movies they watched as children, but that was not what got you started, was it?*

I knew I would make a feature film only at the age of 27. I studied political science and international relations and had the intention of becoming a journalist or work in foreign affairs. I had no intention of making a film. The first person to make me realize there was someone behind the film was Steven Spielberg. I saw his name on "Close Encounters" and "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and "E.T." and said, "I want to see what he does next." He was my first influence but it is ironic because he is everything our film industry is not — big Hollywood movies. And then I saw "Amadeus" and what Milos Foreman did and it brought me into another spectrum of what film could do. And then then I participated in a contest from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the French side, a contest called "The Race Around the World." Every year they would chose eight amateurs and give them cameras. We had to travel alone for six months and do 20 short films in 26 weeks in 20 different countries. The movies were shown before a panel of judges live on television. When I came back from that my life had changed and I wanted to make documentaries. Ken Loach and Mike Leigh became my real inspirations.

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